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ABSTRACT

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) will forever be caught in the following paradox: the rise of the research university has allowed for specialization that generates writing embedded in differentiated knowledge communities. However a WAC program may characterize the overarching importance of writing, its conception can never be the same as that of a disciplinary insider's. Dialogue among faculty can help set up a WAC program, but dialogue does not always result in critical transformation of pedagogy and curriculum. At universities that have WAC programs, there are usually some faculty who are already doing a good job of initiating students into their disciplines while at the same time inviting critique and revision of the very terms of analysis at that discipline's core. However, institutional constraints do play a part in what WAC can and cannot do: to incorporate writing could mean retooling not just the courses but the entire power structure and value system of the university. The accumulation of local knowledge from disciplines and a willingness to be changed by it as much as educators attempt to change it is WAC's greatest strength and WAC's future. Now that WAC programs are building up an accumulation of knowledge of their own, what they know is something to be reckoned with--an intersection of rhetoric, pedagogy, and a growing awareness of how disciplines communicate what they know. (RS)

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Compositionists David Russell, Robert Connors, and James Slevin, along with institutional historians Lawrence Vesey and Gerald Graff, have contributed in various ways to a deterministic vision of writing in the research university that challenges advocates of writing across the curriculum who are nevertheless bent on turning that vision around:

> At the same time, so this version of history goes, specialized languages of inquiry have developed in the disciplines, there has remained in place a politically and economically convenient myth of a common unified academic discourse that faculty believe can be taught as a pragmatic neutral tool for the expression of ideas. The research university's compartmentalized organization of knowledge into discreet departments has been made possible--or at least more efficient--says Russell, by the "transparency" of that academic discourse and the marginalization of writing instruction. The rise of freshman composition as gatekeeper and provider of writing skills, has meart that departments have been able to avoid responsibility for using writing to help students conceptualize and participate in their disciplines. They often happily admit for a permanent stay only those initiates who can figure out, let us say, the biology or sociology community's codes on their own.

In this way the very theory of discipline-specific discourse that serves as the basis of the writing across the curriculum

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movement goes hand in hand with the chief source of resistance to it: knowledge particular to disciplines is created and maintained by the specialized languages of insiders. But too often the real work those insiders do with their sacred texts precludes their making the specialized languages visible to the students they teach. Students are the recipients of truths after professional inquiry is over. They are not let in on the conflicts, as Graff says, but the results of the conflicts. Many faculty still insist that they write, as Slevin has pointed out, in "unobtrusive, transparent prose that does not get in the way of their perception of those truths." To paraphrase Adrienne Rich's poem about Madame Curie's relationship with radium--when we start to mess with writing across the curriculum, very often, "our wounds come from the same source as our power."

Who among us would disagree now with the idea that when faculty teach writing or make use of writing in any course, we teach not just a version of reality (James Berlin's phrase)--we teach our discipline's version of reality? Its assumptions, key words, ways of knowing. But as Berlin's work continues to point out and Daniel Mahala has recently suggested: it is often a hegemonic version of reality that is deposited and withdrawn, marketed and consumed, a normative discourse that suppresses conflict, not a set of disciplinary code-cracking tools that encourage and reward critique of the very assumptions and terms of analysis at the core of that knowledge.

What would it really take if WAC programs were to disrupt the myth of a unified discourse, still available, by the way,

wherever Freshman Composition is sold? What would it take if WAC were really able to trade on those specialized discourses, those different versions of reality? David Russell is more right than he even knows that it would take "disciplinary faculty who understand the rhetorical nature of their work and make conspicuous and visible what was transparent." Lots and lots of them. If WAC programs are to last, he says, it will be because they call for a "fundamental commitment to a radically different way of teaching." Daniel Mahala has similarly called for WAC to lead interdisciplinary dialogue on alternative views of academic literacy, rather than, in the interest of gaining converts, incorporate writing merely to aid and abett more "field coverage" and "standardized methodolgy."

But given my experiences with WAC at three large universities that value research far above teaching and service, a "radically different way of teaching" is not likely to come about on a grand scale, given the very curricular history and university ecosystem that Russell and others describe.

As for WAC's disrupting the notion of a universal discourse, there seems to be no way of getting around the fact that any view of mass curricular change--in universally valuing writing as a way of learning or Mahala's call for literacy reform, still implies some version of the "ideal of a single academic community" united by "common values, goals and standards of discourse" that Russell, indeed, that anyone, who argues for writing as socially situated, has blamed in the first place for writing's invisibility in the curriculum and ghettoization in the lowest rungs of the English department.

Writing across the curriculum will forever be caught in the following paradox: the rise of the research university has allowed for specialization that generates writing embedded in differentiated knowledge communities. Each knowledge community therefore develops its own specialized discourse. WAC has aimed to replace the universal transparent model with one that responds to the needs of these differing and incommensurate discourses. But in emphasizing the necessity of writing instruction in the various disciplines, WAC advocates inevitably work from a presupposition that tends to obscure the difference it claims to uphold. Whether it be a belief in the contextual nature of language, the applicability of a developmental learning scheme, or curricular reform through ideology critique, what remains is the belief in the centrality of writing, both in each discipline's organization of knowledge and in the learning process of its new recruits. However a WAC program may characterize the overarching importance of writing, its conception can never be the same as that of a disciplinary insider's. An outsider can simply never know what--or how--an insider knows.

Okay, so what do you do after you point the finger at a this dilemma? You can keep exposing the paradoxical nature of the problem, I guess, and ask English-trained WAC advocates ascribing to theories of situated discourse, just where they are going to stand themselves. And what role they will play in WAC that doesn't privilege English or one of its interdisciplinary frontier sites like cultural studies? I have asked this question of myself many times...how is it that WAC is not just an

exploration and conquest of new worlds in the name of its mother country, the empire of English?

No, no, no, that's not what it is, you say...pure WAC, the wackiest of the WAC, is not colonization. We are not adding islands to our domain. We are more like the ship navigating the waters of Lyotard's archipelago, forever arriving with fresh provisions, but never landing, never staying, and never translating our bibles into their languages. And the best WAC programs are never hegemonic. WAC sees itself as a facilitator, a mediator between discourses. In this view, we are merely helping disciplines incorporate in their teaching what they already know. We are the midwifes, the mirrors--It's Platonic, it's Lacanic.

Are we not, though, when we talk like this, perhaps idealizing these other disciplines, and overestimating the extent to which faculty who are NOT LIKE US--or not like the self-reflective Geertzes and Foucaults we hope we might find across the curriculum--the extent to which they are willing to make their students "aware that the discipline is constituted through its discourse"? It is a vexed relationship that WAC often has with disciplines--our uncertainty about who should become more like whom. In viewing disciplines as Other, we see them as either noble savages, natural inquirers, or imperfect versions of ourselves in need of reform--In both of these instances, their context becomes our context, whether we want to praise their use of journals or analysis or blame their grading of surface-level error. At the same time that we condemn a universal academic discourse, we seem to smuggle it back in with our categorization

of their discourse and their pedagogy, Finally, we understand discipines in ways they do not understand themselves.

Perhaps you say, Ah, but turnabout is fair play. What's the big deal? The other disciplines have made our context their context for so long--in claiming when students can't write in history or physics that English "has not done its job."

Or, maybe you reply: what other language do I have to interpret the other languages with--besides my own? A dialogic model for WAC is the best kind, you say. Dialogue among members of separate disciplinary cultures, speakers of different disciplinary languages, as Catherine Blair and Daniel Mahala have suggested, can lead to an understanding of our differences--an understanding that we can use to revise our literacy praxis. Dialogue among faculty, I will admit, can go a long way in setting up a WAC program, in establishing guidelines and writing-intensive course requirements that everyone can live with, in workshops where faculty teach one another. All this dialogue finds its way into good writing pedagogy--between teacher and students and students and students, who like the faculty, one hopes, can exchange competing perspectives, and locate themselves somehow in knowledge communities. Dialogue is also the basis for the WAC consultant model that Ray Smith will talk about in a few minutes.

But before he does, I'd like to face down the paradox I've set up here by suggesting/admitting (?) that WAC dialogue or WAC interaction does not always result in critical transformation of pedagogy and curriculum. Surprise. Surprise. At the three universities where I have been associated with WAC programs,

to my delight, I admit, I have encountered, and surely you have too, those faculty fellow-travelers, who were already doing a pretty good job of initiating students into their disciplines, while at the same time, perhaps, inviting critique and revision of the very terms of analysis at that discipline's core. They are few: Ray insists on calling their participation in WAC "the only good sort of elitism." While they make excellent shills and presenters in faculty workshops, WAC programs that want to last simply cannot count on a large number of conflict-sharers. And like all WAC promoters, we have had other takers--some from workshops, some on the doorstep, some with peculiar agendas for good writing, some who even perhaps foolishly agree to collaborate with us in case studies of their intensive-writing courses.

Time spent in their "culture"--in their classrooms, course readings, student papers, and in conversation, with them and their students reveals that the sort of critique students are permitted to engage in in their writing is grounded not just in their response to the assumptions and norms of the discipine, but also the beliefs of particular instructors and the extent to which they have reflected on these in planning and carrying out their course activities. My colleagues across the curriculum do not always view inquiry in their disciplines as I had imagined. Like all of us, they do not always enact or make possible in practice what they say they believe or want to have happen. I do not always agree with the changes they make when writing plays a bigger part in their courses. What's my point in telling you this?

That, finally, I am not only interested in what is being called for in unified theories of writing across the curriculum, or even in what is possible, as I am, as I have to be, in what is practiced in those classroom cultures. When we look at the uses faculty make of writing, and the changes they choose to make in their courses--after they "dialogue" with us, while they are "dialoguing" with us, as a result of or in spite of "dialoguing" with us, we have had to say, more often than not: how would these changes in the assignments involve tinkering with the whole course--and Russell and Mahala are right--it will change the whole course. And, finally, whose course is it?

And while I am tempted to agree with Mahala that WAC does not want to be accused of maintaining "a certain congruence with institutional conditions" in order to survive, when I am walkin the walk and not just talking the talk, I find that it is much easier said than done to engage faculty members in "critical transactions" about writing of the sort Mahala advocates, that they do not always want to have, and which finally in at least half the cases, pits my view of their discipline against theirs.

A course in accounting comes to mind. I attended this course and took field notes, interviewed students and examined papers, as part of a joint project with an accounting professor assessing his use of writing. I couldn't help thinking that WAC would have been better served if the professor had allowed students to form auditing teams and actually write up--from sources--the parts that make up a full auditor's report rather than merely complete multiple choice homework and exams. Forget about a deconstruction of the institution of the audit as the perfect example of

Foucault's penopticon. His main interest in the writing assignments that simulated portions of an audit was whether students' completion of the assignments improved their performance on a grammar and usage test he administered at the begining and then at the end of the course. His criteria for good writing in accounting remained the same at the end of the project: "be clear, concise, and grammatically correct" -- qualities he felt certain would get students through the short essay section of the CPA exam. In spite of our dialogue about how writing was working in the course, he felt it would have been far too much work--invisible work--to his department--to retool his lecture and review course as collaborative inquiry group projects that included the purposeful writing up of an audit. Institutional constraints DO play a part in what WAC can and cannot do: to incorporate writing could indeed mean retooling not just courses but the entire power structure and value system of the university, which is tied to the value systems of individual instructors: not a project this fellow was ready or willing to collaborate on.

Nevertheless, I stand by the view that the accumulation of local knowledge from disciplines and a willingness to be changed by it as much as we attempt to change it is WAC's greatest strength and WAC's future--building our repertoire and helping faculty make the changes they want to make with writing. Merely acting as facilitator of some floating interdisciplinary forum on academic literacy, as Mahala suggests, and not copping to some alternative to the dreaded "assumptions of commonality" would

have WAC run the risk of becoming even more invisible than freshman composition ever was. If, as a result of interdisciplinary dialogue, freshmen composition would indeed wither away, if WAC programs could wither away after that, fine, but at most large research universities, that is not the way it is likely to go down: invisible programs get cut; disciplines go back to their corners and some WAc'ers will have no discipline to go home to. Given the realities of the research university, we are better off acknowledging the WAC paradox and the limits of what we can and cannot do.

But I would like to further suggest that now that WAC programs, particularly those housed outside of English departments, are building up an accumulation of knowledge of their own, through consultations and, increasingly, through research, what they know is something to be reckoned with: call it midwifery or whatever you want, this knowledge is a new expertise that is growing and changing, a speciality of its own, one that is not necessarily formalist or expressivist, to use Mahala's perjorative labels, but something else altogether: an intersection of rhetoric, pedagogy, and a growing awareness of how various disciplines communicate what they know--this knowledge is perhaps its own discourse, perhaps its own discipline. And it may be time now to stop worrying if we are standing in a marked or unmarked position or who we sound like. It may be time to let other specialists interact with us in a variety of ways.

Or... it may be time to release our grasp on the old model of a liberal education altogether--the model that had reading and

writing well as its core, and accept that if critique, not eloquence, is the turn we have made in our discipline, other disciplines have turned other corners that do not put written literacy at the center of all that they do. And then, instead of coming up with new and ever more complex ways to be resisted, we can rest.